Notes from Charrette Opening Day, Tuesday, August 15, 2007

Comments from Mayor Kathy Porter in the Council Chambers

Takoma Park Mayor Kathy Porter opened the first session by explaining how this charrette fits into the larger picture of transformations to the City. Years ago, Porter noted, a great many City residents were involved in producing a master plan. That plan provided a global picture of what was wanted in the way of changes. This charrette represents the next step. Its purpose, she said, "is to translate *your* wishes into a detailed plan."

It is a process that the city council consider high priority, and about which it has acted to generate interest. "We would like to see a more productive economic corridor," Porter said. Toward that end, City staff has of late been contacting owners, developers, State (officials) and others to generate interest. But today, Porter added, we are at the "what do you do" stage.

Porter concluded with an overview of the charrette team's credentials, noting that it is a high-profile group with nationally recognized authorities in the art of place-making and in creating pedestrian-friendly, walkable streets.

Comments from Stuart Sirota

Stuart Sirota, principle of TND Planning Group, noted that he, like other charrette team members, has worked with place-making teams throughout the United States. He currently resides in Baltimore, but he also lived for a number of years in nearby Hyattsville and, as a result, is very familiar with Takoma Park, a place which he called "one of the coolest little towns I've been to."

He and his multidisciplinary team, said Sirota, "all have the same values of 'place making,'" of making the kind of pedestrian friendly places that have not been built over the past 50 years, and which need "lots of love and care" to be brought into being.

The City, he noted, has a master plan to improve all of New Hampshire Avenue, though these changes will not all happen right away.

Sirota noted that, for his team members, the charrette did not begin this week; they have already been doing background work and gathering data for several months, including on Takoma Park's past.

History and context

Takoma Park was built in the 1880s, at which time it was Washington, D.C.'s first suburb, said Sirota. Everything else between the City and the nation's capital was rural.

Today's Takoma Park has "unbelievable charm and character [and] wonderfully walkable streets," he said. On New Hampshire Avenue, however, "things change radically." The pedestrian realm here is of low quality and dangerous, he said, simultaneously demonstrating slides of bus stops without shelters and other areas indicating poor design (including homes situated so as to face dumpsters and the backs of stores). Pedestrians, when they are found on New Hampshire at all, are there not because they want to be there, but because they have to. "Our goal," he noted, "is to make [New Hampshire] a place people *want* to be."

Sirota showed a diagram indicating that the chances of being killed on a street increases geometrically with the increase in speed of the vehicles on it. A pedestrian struck by a car moving 20 mph has about a 5% chance of being killed. At 30 mph, the chances are 40%; and at 40 mph, it is already 70%. This makes a street which provides no buffers between pedestrians and vehicles both unsafe in feel and unsafe in fact.

In the 1950s, New Hampshire was still a narrow, lightly-traveled road, but in the post WWII era it was overtaken by the new paradigm shift toward auto-oriented suburbs. The nation largely stopped building neighborhoods where you can walk to do most things, he said. Now it became necessary to drive "even to get bread or a quart of milk." So-called 'arterial roads' began serving subdivisions.

And though "the nucleus" of Takoma Park was walkable, New Hampshire became simply "an edge"—in other words, "a way to get through, to get around" the city. Which gave rise, he added, to a pattern of use where walkability "was not on the radar screen."

Given that history, Stuart asked, how does one get to walkability and the creation of a sense of place? A charrette, he said, is the ideal process to meet this goal.

Phases of a charrette

Phase 1 of the charrette process has already been happening over the past few months. During this time the team has engaged in background research and preparation, including the creation of specialized maps to analyze what currently exists.

Today, noted Sirota, begins Phase 2, a phase which typically lasts from five to seven days, and during which public participation is the key element. Phase 2 works as follows. After getting some initial indications from local residents, the charrette team will produce some very rough draft images and then display them to elicit feedback. After community observation and comment, the team then goes back to its drawing boards to 'tweak' or fix what was presented. This process goes through a number of iterations throughout the week.

The resulting 'preferred plan' completes Phase 2, but is not yet the end of the charrette: it is followed by a Phase 3, lasting several months, during which the plan is further refined. The end result, said Sirota, is a draft plan that includes a number of key elements necessary for actual implementation, and which includes zoning, managerial and enforcement aspects.

Principles of Walkability

Sirota then outlined what he calls the ten major factors which define a place's walkability. They are listed in reverse order, beginning with number ten:

10.) **Narrow Streets**, which are easier to cross and slow down cars

9.) **Trees,** which provide 'vertical elements' (from the point of view of passing vehicles) and hence help calm traffic.

8.) **Volume of traffic** (Sirota noted that all scenarios for the future presume that New Hampshire will continue to have a large volume of traffic—but he added that traffic can be managed in a variety of ways.)

7.) **Sidewalks** affect walkability, with wider sidewalks being clearly better than narrow ones.

6.) **Interconnected streets**: a dense network of streets with frequent intersections presents the pedestrian with choices and variety, and enhances walkability.

5.) **On-street parking** presents a buffer to traffic from the point of view of pedestrians on the sidewalk, and is also good for businesses along the street. Studies, noted Sirota, have demonstrated that each on-street parking space translates into $200,000 per year in increases revenues for the adjoining businesses. This statistic is explained, said Sirota, by drivers' preference for parking on the street as opposed to pulling into off-street parking lots.

4.) **Slower traffic speeds** likewise make pedestrians feel safer.

3.) **Mixed land uses** provide pedestrians with a *reason* to walk. This mixture of uses should provide variety even within a short distance.

2.) **Buildings that front the street**—in other words, that are not set back from the sidewalk and are not obstructed from it by parking lots.

1.) **Small block size:** This key element is tightly connected, Sirota noted, with element number six (interconnected streets).

Transect Zones

There exists a wide range of degrees of density, from the more rural to the more urban. This fact has given rise to the concept of the Urban Transect Zone, which allows one to classify a given area as to where it fits within the density range. What is of particular interest in this connection, however, Sirota stressed, is that for each given zone there is a "toolkit" available that can make that particular area more walkable. This toolkit pertains to building massing and form, building heights, and widths of roads, among other factors.

It is not the case, said Sirota, that a wide street with high volumes of vehicle traffic, must, by some universal law, be discouraging and unfriendly to the pedestrian. To illustrate this point, he put up a slide of the famous Avenue des Champs Elysées in Paris, located, he noted, in a T5 or T6 urban transect zone. Here we have a very wide street with a high volume of traffic—and yet, elements of good design have been brought into play so as to make this a nonetheless highly walkable (indeed a famously walkable and beautiful) place. Without imagining that we would, in Takoma Park, imitate this Parisian street in the literal sense, there is no reason why some of these same fundamental design principles cannot be applied. Sirota acknowledged that it can be difficult to imagine New Hampshire being different than it presently is.

With this, Sirota concluded his formal presentation and suggested that those present move out to the tables to look at the detailed maps of the New Hampshire Corridor where they could point out where there are particular problems, and also write down--or even draw directly onto the maps--comments and suggestions. A charrette facilitator was at each table and map to facilitate the process.

Prior to leaving for the table top exercise, however, an audience member asked for Sirota's thoughts regarding the likelihood that big changes could come to New Hampshire Avenue given that it is a state highway whose fate is largely controlled by entities, such as the State Highway Administration (SHA), which are not controlled by the residents and government of Takoma Park.

In answer, Sirota noted, firstly, that the SHA was itself a stakeholder and a participant in the charrette process this week. "We will work with them," he said. It is the charrette team's job to develop recommendations on what should happen. Meanwhile, "SHA is not in the business of placemaking; its business is moving cars." Having said that, Sirota quickly added that the Maryland SHA "is one of the most progressive in the U.S." – far better, he added (to laughter) than its counterparts in, say, Alabama. Maryland's SHA is making steps, said Sirota, toward 'context sensitive road design.' What is more, Sirota has just recently been working with Maryland SHA in the town of Ashby along a stretch of New Hampshire where the context has a village character.

"In the end," said Sirota, "SHA granted what we sought." It will definitely be necessary to work with the SHA, but, he added, a key factor will be the extent to which the community itself gets excited about the process of change and gets involved and exerts

pressure. “We think big changes can be made and still keep traffic moving,” Sirota concluded.

Comments overheard at table tops

— It’s a chicken or egg problem: businesses don’t come because it’s not safe. People want to go to nice businesses, but they aren’t there. People have been robbed at bus stops. People driving by throw trash. People don’t go there.

— We need more of a ‘K Street’ type street, and more of a grid, so that there are more options to circulate on and off of New Hampshire.

— We need more density, and more blocks.

— I don’t think the Champs Elysee is a relevant paradigm: we need to look at streets everyone has seen and that have similar relief changes, such as Connecticut Ave. in the District.

— How can we change the infrastructure so as to attract more economic development?
— We need a bike route.
— People who live in Prince George’s County *like* the Shopper’s Food Warehouse. Others like the pawnshop. People drive because they *want* to.
— What if the parking lot (by Shoppers) was smaller?
— There are big trees on New Hampshire in the district—why not in Takoma Park?
— Will building beautiful new buildings lead to gentrification?

Wrap-up session after ‘Table Tops’

Group 1

Key problems noted include the trash on New Hampshire, and identifying who is responsible for cleaning it up. ‘People look at you like you are crazy if you are out walking on New Hampshire.’ The group liked the idea of medians, buffers, and trees to calm traffic.

Hopes include new and different stores: a deli or two, restaurants, cafes, a bookstore, laundries, and stores that address daily needs.

Group 2

The forested area (south-west of Sligo Creek) could have trails and become a very nice area. The Champs Elysee-type street ‘is what we want.’ This group’s spokesman, who

owns a business in the area and has extensive experience working with developers and area planning agencies, offered to share his experience and said he would like to see local small investors and teams of local developers to be involved in a big way.

His group had mentioned it favored a 'K Street' type multi-way boulevard. Also: culture and art zones; trees and medians; LEED (energy efficient) buildings. The stores in the area 'have too much parking.'

Group 3 comments

This group's spokesperson is a landscape architect and City resident. He suggested the re-design take advantage of the fact that the street is far from flat, but instead has significant valleys and peaks. Where the street is on a ridge, the building heights could be kept within, say, the 4 – 6 story range, while in the valleys, the buildings could be higher, thereby creating more density without changing the overall feel of the street or overshadowing anyone. His group felt that the 4 – 6 story height range was roughly what 'people were talking about.'

He also noted that there were some jurisdictional problems with crime.

Finally, he suggested that there are possibilities for using existing electric power corridors—which, he noted, are 'as wide as the beltway'—as a resource for creating electric-powered transportation thruways.

Group 4 (Ethan Allen Avenue)

'We go to local shops (as it is).'

Main problems: too much trash; sidewalks crumbling; lack of safety (people killed by cars); no curb cuts for those who use wheelchairs; lack of a buffer separating residential areas from (sometimes noxious) business areas.

Hopes: "We like the Champs Elysees idea; you know, 'oui, oui.'" Cafés. Walkability is the key. More of a residential-commercial mix. (But with the commercial areas having to respect the needs of residents more.)

Street problems: When going west on 410 across New Hampshire, a lane disappears. Going south on New Hampshire and turning west on 410, there is a bus stop in the way. Delivery trucks at the mattress store block access and prevent residents from using area shops.

Group 5

Recommendations include:

Redevelop surface parking—most of which is not being used--and convert to mixed use.

Tree-lined medians and sidewalks, and wider sidewalks. Sidewalks on both sides of street. Buffers between street and pedestrians.

Improve storefronts.

Have coordinated street furniture all along New Hampshire, and also coordinated hardscape.

Bike facilities/paths, along New Hampshire.

Improve signage to recreation area.

Relocate utility poles, or wrap sidewalks around them.

Can we slow traffic, but keep volume the same, by using traffic circles? For example, a large circle at Route 410 and New Hampshire?

PRG: 6:40 p.m., Wednesday